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Creating a Knowledge Community: Embedded Professional Practice

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Abstract: The Faculty of Education at a Southwestern Ontario, Canadian University appointed an Experiential Learning Specialist (ELS) as a member of the Faculty in 2007. The Experiential Learning Specialist acts as an impartial resource for all members of the educational community (teacher candidates, faculty, staff, school partners), by providing counselling, collaboration and mediation to promote social justice and equity in teacher education. In this regard, the Experiential Learning Specialist has developed professional resources, provided confidential counselling, guided conflict resolution through mediation processes, and endeavoured to build a *knowledge community*. The continued focus has been to contribute to the development and implementation, through consultation and collaboration, of opportunities with which to strengthen professionalism and professional relationships. Community building through collaboration fosters sharing, intergroup dialogue, and relationship building; consequently, former resistance and reluctance to discuss and resolve conflicts may be eliminated, pre-conceived biases may be addressed, and in teacher education this process may also foster peer collaboration (Roland, Colella & Igbokwe 2014). Teacher Education programs must build communities of practice to “collectively redefine practice” as well as, knowledge communities “to improve individual practice” (Seaman 2008, p 277). A critical aspect of professional development is shared knowledge, “...teachers authentically share their stories of practice in safe places – what may be referred to as *knowledge communities* to make their personal practical knowledge explicit to themselves and to others” (Olson & Craig 2001, p 668). These strategies would support cultural and linguistic differences in educational practice, as well as, work to address the challenges and barriers that culturally diverse teacher candidates may face in teacher education field practicum settings.

Keywords: teacher education, professional practice, knowledge communities

1. Introduction

In 2007, as part of its ongoing commitment to social justice and equity, a Faculty of Education at a Southwestern Ontario, Canadian University appointed an Experiential Learning Specialist (ELS) as an integral component of its teacher education program. The overarching responsibility of this Experiential Learning Specialist role, which has continued to exist since 2007, is to promote the values of social justice and equity in the teacher education program. The Experiential Learning Specialist acts as an impartial resource for all members of the educational community (teacher candidates, faculty, staff, school partners) by providing counselling, collaboration and mediation to promote social justice and equity in education, and to resolve conflicts. In this regard, the Experiential Learning Specialist has developed professional resources, provided confidential counselling, guided conflict resolution through mediation processes, and endeavoured to build a *knowledge community*. The continued focus of the ELS work has been to contribute to the development and implementation, through consultation and collaboration, of opportunities with which to strengthen professionalism and professional relationships including, identifying and addressing barriers encountered by historically under-represented groups in the teaching profession. The Experiential Learning Specialist role is a unique and innovative approach to embedding professional practice in teacher education. The subject of this paper is an exploration of the development of a knowledge community through embedded professional practice involving reciprocal learning and reflection.

2. The role of the experiential learning specialist in creating a knowledge community

The overarching responsibility of the Experiential Learning Specialist (ELS) is to promote the values of social justice and equity in the Pre-Service teacher education program. Given this, the theoretical underpinning of the approach used by the ELS is rooted in the work of Lee Anne Bell (cited in Hackman & Rauscher 2004) which identifies three main areas of focus in social justice education: social responsibility; student empowerment; and, the equitable distribution of resources. Bell notes that the goals of social justice educators are to promote and foster student engagement so that they become *agents* of their education, and ensuring that students feel safe and that their contributions to the classroom are valued. Professional practice is developed through experiential learning and critical reflection, and particularly through opportunities for teacher candidates to engage in peer-education activities. As such, it is imperative that teacher education develop community building strategies: to build communities of practice to “collectively redefine practice” as well as, knowledge communities “to improve individual practice” (Seaman 2008, p 277). These strategies support critical pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning with which to contest cultural hegemony in the classroom.

Through peer engagement, knowledge is shared which values the multi-epistemic perspectives of culturally diverse classrooms. To this end, the ELS endeavours to provide embedded professional development opportunities whereby peers engage in discussions to listen and share their experiences, to as (Huber 1999, p 19) states, "...attempt to give voice to tacitly held personal knowledge....without abandoning the particular, the contextual, and the complex..." (Conle 2000, p 51). These opportunities to *co-participate in practice* (Roth & Boyd 1999) create a learning environment which is supportive of inclusion and the valuation of multi-epistemic perspectives; this exchange of knowledge leading to the creation of a *teacher knowledge community* (Roland, Colella & Igbokwe, 2014). Further, Seaman (2008) describes the development of *knowledge communities* as opportunities to "share their personal practical knowledge as a way of reflecting, a way of knowing, and a way of bringing meaning to others' stories....contributions from members of a knowledge community help story and re-story experiential narratives while shaping their meaning" (p 272).

Adams (2009) states that in a community, "...the idea is that you have this collective intelligence" (para. 8) in which individuals are able to share with each other best practices and new approaches for engaging students. Community building through collaboration fosters sharing, intergroup dialogue, and relationship building; consequently, former resistance and reluctance to discuss and resolve conflicts may be eliminated, pre-conceived biases may be addressed, and in teacher education this process may also foster peer collaboration (Roland, Colella & Igbokwe 2014). "Professional growth often depends not merely on developing new ideas or theories of action, but on eliminating or modifying those old ideas that have been shaping behaviour" (Osterman 1990, p 135). As bell hooks (1994) opines:

"We are rarely able to interact only with folks like ourselves, who think as we do. No matter how much some of us deny this reality and long for the safety and familiarity of sameness, inclusive ways of knowing and living offer us the only true way to emancipate ourselves from the divisions that limit our minds and imaginations." (p A44).

Therefore, it is imperative that professional development involve opportunities to explore ideas, learn from others' experiences, and in some instances, shift an individual's point of view regarding educational issues and topics – in other words, create a knowledge community which is reciprocal in nature by allowing the novice and the experienced professional to learn from each other (Roland, Colella & Igbokwe). A critical aspect of professional development is shared knowledge, "...teachers authentically share their stories of practice in safe places – what may be referred to as *knowledge communities* to make their personal practical knowledge explicit to themselves and to others" (Olson & Craig, 2001, p 668). These strategies not only support cultural and linguistic differences in educational practice, but also, work to address the challenges and barriers that culturally diverse teacher candidates may face in teacher education field practicum settings.

The Experiential Learning Specialist practice as a teacher educator is guided by the following principles: reflective practice as a core means for teacher candidate development in the capacity of perspective taking and critical thinking; experiential learning as a constructivist approach to learning through active inquiry; and, the importance of a knowledge community to create an environment in which teacher candidates feel safe, valued, and respected for their contributions as they are mentored and coached in their development as beginning teachers.

2.1 Reflective practice

Teacher candidates engage in reflection activities to promote critical thinking, and to facilitate the development of their perspective-taking capacity. An example of this is an introductory exercise the ELS has used called, *Creating Your Personal Map of the Journey to Teaching*: By articulating their journey through words, pictures, etc., and then sharing their *personal stories* with their peers, teacher candidates not only learn about themselves, but also about the differences and similarities they share. Bell (2010) asserts that, "...stories and words of others sometimes open up less defensive, more honest dialogue" (p 10). A storytelling approach encourages teacher candidates to be reflexive given that as students, they may experience a range of dissonance with their personal lives juxtaposed with their professional role as a beginning teacher. Therefore, using a storytelling approach in this exercise also provides a creative opportunity to explore the professional and ethical standards of practice for the teaching profession in a non-threatening and meaningful manner. The focus of this exercise is on the development of teacher candidate capacity for critical thinking and reflexive practice.

2.2 Experiential learning

The Experiential Learning Specialist mentors and coaches teacher candidates in their development as beginning teaching professionals; teacher education necessitates that teacher candidates successfully navigate the complex and intersecting roles of student within the Faculty, as well as that of teaching professional in the educational system. Learning how to successfully apply the tenets of professional practice can be fraught with difficulty, particularly at the individual level in terms of developing a personal understanding of the expectations of the profession (Roland 2013). The statement, “There are some things that cannot be taught, they must be learned” (unknown) succinctly articulates the importance of experiential learning for students to construct such knowledge by thoughtfully linking curricula with the classroom students’ lives through active inquiry. An example of this is the Professional Practice workshop facilitated by the ELS during orientation for teacher candidates. Clicker technology is utilized to ensure anonymity for the teacher candidates as they answer questions (thereby ensuring personal safety in responding), and after responses are graphically displayed for everyone to review, a large group discussion takes place to determine the best answer. This workshop allows for peer-directed teaching about why a response may be correct or incorrect in terms of professional practice.

2.3 Knowledge community

As stated earlier, to actively engage in the process of learning, teacher candidates must feel valued, and they must feel a sense of belonging within the professional classroom. The Experiential Learning Specialist collaborates and consults with the Associate Dean Pre-Service, as well as with teacher candidates and school partners, to develop a range of opportunities with which to build a professional *knowledge community* in the Pre-Service teacher education program – a community of practice which promotes the values of social justice and equity in education, and which facilitates the development of critical knowledge and skills in teaching practice. To be effective and to model inclusive pedagogy, the ELS approach is highly collaborative, providing teacher candidate empowerment in the development of their *voice* as a beginning teacher. Additionally, this learning process is reciprocal, and while it is important for the Experiential Learning Specialist to bring their expertise in terms of subject knowledge to the classroom, it is also important to remain openly respectful and to acknowledge the value of the lessons that teacher candidates share in the classroom.

3. Embedded professional practice

The Faculty of Education is committed to the improvement of its teacher education program through scholarship, practice and outreach. In facilitating embedded professional development strategies, the ELS has developed through a process of consultation and collaboration, a number of resources with which to create knowledge and to promote the identification and exploration of practices to enhance teacher candidate professional development as social justice educators. As a preliminary step, the Experiential Learning Specialist conducted an environmental scan in 2007 which involved meeting with various faculty colleagues and teacher candidates. During these meetings the participants shared their impressions of the Faculty’s teacher education program and its commitment to social justice and equity in education; these conversations including identifying existing and potential barriers, issues/concerns, as well as recommendations for future development and enhancement of the program. The result of this scan led to the development of a number of teaching and professional development activities undertaken by the ELS, including: teaching the Language and Cultural Engagement course; organizing the Annual Social Justice in Education Conference; developing the pilot for the School Community Days project (Beginning of the Year Experience); providing individual counselling; and the creation and facilitation of a number of additional professional development initiatives for teacher candidates.

3.1 Language and cultural engagement course

Registration for the Language and Cultural Engagement course has been open to all interested teacher candidates in the Pre-Service program for the past five years; in previous years, only internationally educated teacher candidates and teacher candidates for whom English is an additional language, were encouraged to enrol in this course. The ELS views the opening of registration for this course to all interested teacher candidates as supportive of inclusion, and also values diversity in the classroom – this is particularly important when exploring the cultural nuances of the Canadian classroom through a multi-epistemic lens. This course provides numerous learning opportunities to explore social justice and equity issues in teaching practice from a diverse range of life/lived experiences.

Additionally, to support the success of teacher candidates who may struggle during the field practicum component of the teacher education program, referrals of teacher candidates to audit the Language and Cultural Engagement course are accepted throughout the year. Feedback from teacher candidates indicates that the utilization of a learning-centred approach which involves mentoring and modelling for teacher candidates, meets the learning outcomes of the course. This view is clearly articulated by a former teacher candidate enrolled in the course: “I would recommend this course to anyone who wants to learn and inform themselves about teaching practice through exchange with other students. In no other course did I see as much exchange as I did in this class. Students share their teaching, portfolios, resumes, and practicum experiences very freely as the class environment allows it.”

3.2 Annual social justice in education conference

Since February 2008, the Experiential Learning Specialist has organized and facilitated the Faculty of Education’s Annual Social Justice in Education Conference. This event was originally developed to send a collective message against racist graffiti that had been found in the Faculty building, and to provide a learning opportunity for all teacher candidates regarding the ‘isms’ which inflict society. The objective of this conference has grown in the ensuing years to provide our teacher candidates with an opportunity to gain an understanding and appreciation of social justice in education, and furthermore, to integrate this understanding into a personal vision of the role of the teacher as an *agent of change* – the ultimate goal being to reaffirm our personal and collective commitment to social justice and equity in teaching practice. This conference has become one of the most valued and supported professional learning activities offered to teacher candidates each year. The format of the conference typically involves interactive workshops conducted by local and provincial social justice educators and activists, a student led Diversity Exhibit, and either themed break-out discussions sessions, poster exhibits of lesson resources on social justice themes, and/or a Keynote Speaker. To foster and promote peer-education as professional development, student involvement as workshop facilitators and exhibitors is strongly encouraged and supported. This is an opportunity for the Experiential Learning Specialist to model for teacher candidates how to promote and encourage the *voice* of their classroom students in practice. Every year the feedback about the conference from teacher candidates, faculty, staff and community guests, is overwhelmingly positive.

3.3 School community days

Strengthening the relationship amongst the members of the triumvirate relationship (teacher candidate/faculty advisor/associate teacher), is critical to the promotion of a learning-centred environment with which to foster ongoing professional growth in teacher candidates. There is an indelible link between effective communication and teacher candidate efficacy in development as a beginning teacher. This pilot was developed by the Experiential Learning Specialist when in the role of the Chair of the Faculty’s former Field Experience Committee (FEC). As Chair, the ELS facilitated discussions about how to provide teacher candidates with a beginning of the year experience with the FEC as well as with the Teacher Education Liaison Committee, both of which include teachers from the field, and teacher candidates, as members. The beginning of the year experience was developed to provide teacher candidates with an *experiential learning window* to observe firsthand how classroom teachers organize their classrooms, and begin the critically important task of developing rapport with their classroom students in the first days of the school year. The result of this initiative has been an overwhelming success, both from the perspective of the teachers and the teacher candidates, and this initiative has continued to grow in popularity each year.

3.4 Individual counselling

The Experiential Learning Specialist routinely offers individual counselling for teacher candidates and faculty. In some cases, individual counselling may involve one or two meetings with an individual, or it may span the entire Pre-Service year. However, in numerous cases, many hours are usually spent to provide the individual or group with the opportunity to fully discuss the issue(s), and to ultimately resolve or mediate the situation. Confidential consultation and support has been offered dealing with a wide-range of issues including: Academic counselling; religious accommodation; allegations of harassment (teacher candidate/teacher candidate; teacher candidate/faculty; teacher candidate/associate teacher); allegations of discriminatory behaviour or marginalization (teacher candidate/teacher candidate; teacher candidate/faculty; teacher candidate/associate teacher); support in terms of teaching practice (developing learning plans, providing teaching resources, providing advice and guidance regarding the use of technology – clickers, and creating

lesson plans), support regarding attendance at Professional Standards Committee meetings for academic/disciplinary decisions; support for student facing financial exigency; housing for students; mediating group-work conflicts; counselling re career planning/academic studies; plagiarism/copyright issues; and, referrals regarding mental health issues (anxiety, depression, suicide). This activity is quite substantive and engages a significant portion of the Experiential Learning Specialist's time.

3.5 Additional professional development initiatives

An integral component of the Experiential Learning Specialist role is to develop and deliver professional learning opportunities for teacher candidates. This is particularly important for teacher candidates as they learn to navigate the complexity of being a student in an academic program with the professional responsibilities defined by the teacher licensing body in Ontario – the Ontario College of Teachers. This requires a high degree of reflection-in-practice with which teacher candidates are able to integrate the theory presented during faculty instruction, with the application of this theory as classroom praxis. To create a learning environment that promotes this reflective practice, the ELS has developed a series of additional professional development opportunities for teacher candidates including: the Online Professional Practice Tutorial for Beginning Teachers; the Conversations About Education pilot project; and, the Social Justice Education initiative (video vignettes and case studies).

Throughout the Pre-Service Teacher Education Program teacher candidates are asked to reflect on their professional growth and development as a beginning teacher, and to effectively address this issue, the Experiential Learning Specialist developed an online tutorial using case studies to provide teacher candidates with the opportunity to assume the *role of teacher* in the application of the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) ethical and professional standards of practice for teachers (Roland 2013). A wide-range of situations is presented in the tutorial case studies to illustrate the broad context and application of the OCT standards of practice in the teaching context (Roland). Teacher Candidates are instructed to carefully read each case study, and then select from amongst the answers provided the most correct answer; opportunities to self-correct are built into the tutorial. Teacher candidates upon successful completion of the tutorial (all questions having been answered correctly), are then provided with the opportunity to print a Certificate of Completion to use as an artifact for their Professional Growth Portfolio. The response to the tutorial has been excellent – in 2011.2012, of the 540 teacher candidates invited to take the tutorial, 355 accessed the tutorial, and 155 completed it (Roland).

The Conversations About Education pilot project, another professional development opportunity, was offered as a means to connect educators in as a professional knowledge community; the members of the educational community invited to participate in this pilot project included: teacher candidates, faculty members, educators from the field (School Board, Principal, Teachers), and local organizations providing programming for Newcomers to Canada (Roland, Colella & Igbokwe 2014). This pilot project sought to provide a strategic community-building exercise with which, as Connelly and Clandinin (1990) suggest, ensures the importance of the meaningfulness and relevancy of personal and social lived/life experiences when engaging in exploration, discussion, and reflection concerning pre-conceived ideas – thereby, providing professional development in a multi-epistemic context (Roland, Colella & Igbokwe) The pilot project involved three sessions hosted by the Experiential Learning Specialist on the following topics: Creating a Community in Your Classroom; Permission to Disagree; and Restorative Justice in Our Schools: Principles and Practices. Each of these sessions involved inviting a local social justice educator to use narratives so that participants felt drawn to share their own lived/life experiences relevant to the educational topic. Roland, Colella and Igbokwe indicate that this pilot, as a strategic initiative, addressed the following outcomes: 1) fostering relationships within the educational community to effectively create a knowledge community with which to examine educational issues through a multi-epistemic perspective or lens, and in the process, confronting bias in the teaching profession; and 2) focusing on social justice and equity in education through the provision of professional development opportunities for teaching professionals – not only did the pilot project provide participants with the opportunity to reflect on their own teaching practice, it also provided novel ideas and professional resources for use in their classrooms.

Another initiative, the Social Justice Education project, was developed with teacher candidates to guide teacher candidates by linking knowledge with practice (Roland 2008). The vignettes provide an opportunity for teacher candidates to gain an appreciation and understanding of the tenets of social justice education (social

responsibility, student empowerment, equitable distribution of resources, and becoming *teacher as agent of change*), and reflect on how these tenets may be applied to the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) Ethical and Professional Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession. Each of the four vignettes links a tenet of social justice education with the OCT Standards: Vignette #1, *Social Justice Education: Inclusion vs Exclusion in the classroom*, links the tenet of social responsibility with the ethical and professional standards of trust, integrity and leadership in learning communities; Vignette #2, *Promoting Social Justice in the Classroom*, links student empowerment with the ethical and professional standards of respect and commitment to students and student learning; Vignette #3, *What does being a caring teacher mean?*, links the equitable distribution of resources with the professional practice and the standard of care as a teacher; and, Vignette #4, *Teachers as Agents of Change*, links the importance of professional knowledge and ongoing learning to foster social justice and equity in teaching praxis (Roland). Ultimately, this project, a peer-education initiative, was highly successful in involving teacher candidates in every aspect of the production, including script writing and acting and continues to be a resource for current teacher candidates.

4. Conclusion

The subject of this paper has been the development of a knowledge community through embedded professional practice in teacher education. The Experiential Learning Specialist within the Faculty of Education holds a unique and highly beneficial role in terms of embedding professional practice in the Pre-Service program. As a confidential resource, the ELS provides counselling and mediation to address issues of discrimination/marginalization, and to guide conflict resolution. As well, the embedded professional development programs and projects the ELS has developed provide teacher candidates and educational partners (teachers, community organizations, etc.), with opportunities for collaboration and reflection, in an effort to promote social justice and equity in teaching practice (Ontario College of Teachers 2010). These embedded professional practice resources endeavour to build a *knowledge community* through which teachers may engage in reflexive practice. These professional learning opportunities focus on the balance required by teacher candidates as they navigate the complex terrain between their rights as a student, and their professional responsibilities as beginning teachers. The continued focus of the work of the Experiential Learning Specialist will be to contribute to the development and implementation, through consultation and collaboration, of additional learning opportunities with which to strengthen professionalism and professional practice in the teacher education program.

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